

Sheol and Gehenna

1. Gehinnom/Gehenna in the Hebrew Bible

- The term later used for what we might call “Hell” is Gehenna in Greek (e.g., NT) and Gehinnom in Hebrew (Second Temple and esp. Rabbinic Jewish literature).
- In the Hebrew Bible, we also find this name – but not as a term for the underworld or realm of the dead. The Hebrew “Ge Hinnom” means simply “valley of Hinnom” and is a place on earth: a ravine in the southwestern corner of Jerusalem’s ancient bounds (Josh 15:8; 18:6; Neh 11:30).
- It seems to have been an equivalent of the modern “city dump” and may have also been used for polytheistic worship—particularly passing children through fire as an offering to Molech (so 2 Kings 23:10). After the Babylonian Exile, it was used metaphorically for hell, increasingly (as we shall see) conceived as a place of fire and punishment.

2. Sheol in the Hebrew Bible

Location, shape, and purpose:

- Sheol is located beneath the earth (e.g., Isa 7:11, 57:9; Ezek. 31:14; Ps. 86:13)
- It is very deep (Prov. 9:18; Isa. 57:9)—in fact, possibly as far away from heaven as is possible (Job 11:8; Amos 9:2; Ps. 139:8).
- In Job, Sheol is called a “land” (Job 10:21-22). Isaiah and Ezekiel refer to its “farthest corners” (Isa. 14:15; Ezek. 32:23).
- We also find references to its gates (Job 17:16, 38:17; Isa. 38:10; Ps. 9:14) and compartments (Prov. 7:27).
- It is likened to a pasture for sheep with death as the shepherd (Ps. 49:15).
- It is dark and dreary (Job 10:21, 22); it is like “dust” (Ps. 30:10).
- It is silent (Ps. 88:13, 94:17; Qoh 9:10) and sometimes called “Dumah,” the abode of silence (Ps. 6:6, 30:10, 94:17, 115:17). God is not praised there (Ps. 115:17; Isa. 38:15).

Descent into Sheol:

- The dead are described as descending to Sheol or, alternately, being made to go there (I Sam. 2:6; Job 7:9; Ps. 30:4; Isa. 14:11, 15).
- It is in Sheol that the dead are gathered (Ezek. 32; Isa. 14; Job 30:23), whether righteous or wicked, rich or the poor (cf. Job 3).
- Apparently, the living can be sent there too. The earth “opens her mouth” and swallow people, such that the living are hurled into Sheol (Prov. 1:12; Num. 16:30-33; Ps. 55:16, 63:10).

Experience of Dead in Sheol:

- The fate of the dead in Sheol is often described in terms of sleep (Jer. 51:39; Isa. 26:14; Job 14:12).
- Most often, they are described as shades/shadows (“Rephaim”; Isa. 14:9, 26:14; Ps. 88:5) with no knowledge or feeling (Job 14:13; Qoh. 9:5). They are consigned to oblivion (Ps. 88:13, 94:17; Qoh 9:10).
- We only find scant and vague allusions to some possible experience akin to life. Jacob, for instance, seeks to mourn there (Gen. 37:35, 42:38); David lives there in peace (I Kings 2:6); some warriors have their weapons with them (Ezek. 23:27).
- On certain extraordinary occasions, the dead in Sheol can make their feelings known (Isa. 14:9, 10).

Return from Sheol:

- Sheol is the final appointed house for all the living (Job 30:23; Qoh. 12:5); as a rule, no one returns (II Sam. 12:23; Job 7:9, 10; 10:21; 14:7ff; 16:22). Sheol is hungry for the dead, her desire is never sated (Prov. 30:20; Isa. 5:14; to the degree that Sheol can serve as a metaphor for jealousy, see Song 8:7),
- God, however, rules over Sheol (Amos 9:2; Hos. 13:14; Deut. 32:22; I Sam. 2:6; Prov. 15:11); He thus has the power to save the pious from it, if He so wishes (Ps. 16:10, 59:16). When someone is revived, they are described as ascending from Sheol or as being brought up or lifted up from it (I Sam. 2:6; Job 7:9; Ps. 30:4; Isa. 14:11, 15).
- Others may have this power too: it is from Sheol that Samuel is called by the witch of En-dor (I Sam. 28).
- But, in general, Sheol does not give up her inhabitants. They seem to be held captive with ropes (II Sam. 22:6; Ps. 18:6) and subjected to pains like a prisoner (Ps. 116:3).

References to Sheol in the Hebrew Bible

Genesis 37:35...All his [Jacob's] sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father bewailed him...

Genesis 42:38...But he said, "My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should come to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol."...

Genesis 44:29...If you take this one also from me, and harm comes to him, you will bring down my gray hairs in sorrow to Sheol.'...

Genesis 44:31...when he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die; and your servants will bring down the gray hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol...

Numbers 16:30...But if the LORD creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up, with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised the LORD."...

Numbers 16:33...So they with all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol; the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly...

Deuteronomy 32:22...For a fire is kindled by my anger, and burns to the depths of Sheol; it devours the earth and its increase, and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains...

1Samuel 2:6...The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up...

2Samuel 22:6...the cords of Sheol entangled me, the snares of death confronted me...

1Kings 2:6...Act therefore according to your wisdom, but do not let his gray head go down to Sheol in peace...

1Kings 2:9...Therefore do not hold him guiltless, for you are a wise man; you will know what you ought to do to him, and you must bring his gray head down with blood to Sheol."...

Job 7:9...As the cloud fades and vanishes, so those who go down to Sheol do not come up;...

Job 11:8...It is higher than heaven--what can you do? Deeper than Sheol--what can you know?....

Job 14:13...Oh that you would hide me in Sheol, that you would conceal me until your wrath is past, that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me!...

Job 17:13...If I look for Sheol as my house, if I spread my couch in darkness,...

Job 17:16...Will it go down to the bars of Sheol? Shall we descend together into the dust?"...

Job 21:13...They spend their days in prosperity, and in peace they go down to Sheol...

Job 24:19...Drought and heat snatch away the snow waters; so does Sheol those who have sinned...

Job 26:6...Sheol is naked before God, and Abaddon has no covering...

Psalms 6:5...For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who can give you praise?...

Psalms 9:17...The wicked shall depart to Sheol, all the nations that forget God...

Psalms 16:10...For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit...

Psalms 18:5...the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me...

Psalms 30:3...O LORD, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit...

Psalms 31:17...Do not let me be put to shame, O LORD, for I call on you; let the wicked be put to shame; let them go dumbfounded to Sheol...

Psalms 49:14...Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; Death shall be their shepherd; straight to the grave they descend, and their form shall waste away; Sheol shall be their home...

Psalms 49:15...But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me. Selah...

Psalms 55:15...Let death come upon them; let them go down alive to Sheol; for evil is in their homes and in their hearts...

Psalms 86:13...For great is your steadfast love toward me; you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol...

Psalms 88:3...For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol...

Psalms 89:48...Who can live and never see death? Who can escape the power of Sheol? Selah...

Psalms 116:3...The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish...

Psalms 139:8...If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there...

Psalms 141:7...Like a rock that one breaks apart and shatters on the land, so shall their bones be strewn at the mouth of Sheol...

Proverbs 1:12...like Sheol let us swallow them alive and whole, like those who go down to the Pit...

Proverbs 5:5...Her feet go down to death; her steps follow the path to Sheol...

Proverbs 7:27...Her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death...

Proverbs 9:18...But they do not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol...

Proverbs 15:11...Sheol and Abaddon lie open before the LORD, how much more human hearts!...

Proverbs 15:24...For the wise the path of life leads upward, in order to avoid Sheol below...

Proverbs 23:14...If you beat them with the rod, you will save their lives from Sheol...

Proverbs 27:20...Sheol and Abaddon are never satisfied, and human eyes are never satisfied...

Proverbs 30:16...Sheol, the barren womb, the earth ever thirsty for water, and the fire that never says, "Enough."...

Ecclesiastes 9:10...Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going...

Isaiah 5:14...Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite and opened its mouth beyond measure; the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude go down, her throng and all who exult in her...

Isaiah 7:11...Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven...

Isaiah 14:9...Sheol beneath is stirred up to meet you when you come; it rouses the shades to greet you, all who were leaders of the earth; it raises from their thrones all who were kings of the nations...

Isaiah 14:11...Your pomp is brought down to Sheol, and the sound of your harps; maggots are the bed beneath you, and worms are your covering...

Isaiah 14:15...But you are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit...

Isaiah 28:15...Because you have said, "We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement; when the overwhelming scourge passes through it will not come to us; for we have made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have taken shelter";...

Isaiah 28:18...Then your covenant with death will be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand; when the overwhelming scourge passes through you will be beaten down by it...

Isaiah 38:10...I said: In the noontide of my days I must depart; I am consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years...

Isaiah 38:18...For Sheol cannot thank you, death cannot praise you; those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for your faithfulness...

Isaiah 57:9...You journeyed to Molech with oil, and multiplied your perfumes; you sent your envoys far away, and sent down even to Sheol...

Ezekiel 31:15...Thus says the Lord GOD: On the day it went down to Sheol I closed the deep over it and covered it; I restrained its rivers, and its mighty waters were checked. I clothed Lebanon in gloom for it, and all the trees of the field fainted because of it...

Ezekiel 31:16...I made the nations quake at the sound of its fall, when I cast it down to Sheol with those who go down to the Pit; and all the trees of Eden, the choice and best of Lebanon, all that were well watered, were consoled in the world below...

Ezekiel 31:17...They also went down to Sheol with it, to those killed by the sword, along with its allies, those who lived in its shade among the nations...

Ezekiel 32:21...The mighty chiefs shall speak of them, with their helpers, out of the midst of Sheol: "They have come down, they lie still, the uncircumcised, killed by the sword."...

Ezekiel 32:27...And they do not lie with the fallen warriors of long ago who went down to Sheol with their weapons of war, whose swords were laid under their heads, and whose shields are upon their bones; for the terror of the warriors was in the land of the living...

Hosea 13:14...Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from Death? O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your destruction? Compassion is hidden from my eyes...

Amos 9:2...Though they dig into Sheol, from there shall my hand take them; though they climb up to heaven, from there I will bring them down...

Jonah 2:2...saying, "I called to the LORD out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice..."

Habakkuk 2:5...Moreover, wealth is treacherous; the arrogant do not endure. They open their throats wide as Sheol; like Death they never have enough. They gather all nations for themselves, and collect all peoples as their own...